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# In Search of Solid Ground

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# In Search of Solid Ground

by Robert G. Parr, Ph.D.

It can be unsettling enough when a familiar institution changes, but when several institutions shift at once, we go looking for something stable.

**W**atergate, assassinations, campus protests, race riots, the Vietnam War, the Cold War, secularism, feminism — the 1960s and '70s were a period of cultural upheaval. Stability crumbled as institutions, which had previously been thought firm and trustworthy, were subjected to questioning, critique, and at times, outrage.

Although these decades remain vividly impressed on the minds of many, we don't have to look to the past to see how fragile society is. Contemporary America has experienced similar levels of upheaval: warfare, recessions, political and religious extremism, and moral relativism. It can be disorienting when one seemingly steadfast

institution is shaken. In today's world, we are experiencing complex turmoil as the foundations for multiple institutions give way, leading to anxiety and helplessness. Each time we adjust to our shifting world, we do so with a little less confidence that anything can be truly stable.

The current turbulence of our social institutions exposes the emptiness of the trust we have placed in them. Whether traditional or contemporary societal arrangements, none of those attachments can carry the weight that faith in God alone can provide. A proper understanding of divinely ordained institutions enables Christians to rest in the blessings that are granted through them.

When fear seems natural, perhaps even appropriate, Christians have an opportunity to model a response that reflects their theological foundation and faith in Christ. But we, too, are prone to anxiety and often swayed by cultural unrest. Those who build their house upon the rock of God's Word will be equipped to withstand the shifting sands of contemporary society.

### **Understanding Our Interconnected Institutions**

Social scientists recognize five basic institutions in any society: the family, religion, education, government, and the economy. No matter how developed or simple a society might be, every group of people arranges life around these five primary institutions.

The relationship of these institutions to one another and to the broader culture has changed dramatically over the last century. Prior to the 20th century, the driving force of our American culture was the combined influence of family and religious institutions. The other three institutions were necessary and operative but played a largely supportive role. Such is still the case in many societies of the world. The Islamic world serves as a classic example, as family and religion are the engines that form culture and life among Muslim peoples.

Many social scientists believe that, because of the 20th century Western institutional revolution, the economy has replaced family and religion as the primary institution that defines culture and determines life in the other four. For example, we structure our family life around the rhythm of a five-day workweek, saving the majority of our home interactions for the weekend.

The American Church has long relied on volunteer workers, mostly women, to further its ministries. But with more women employed outside the home today and fewer involved church members, successful church ministry now requires more full-time employees, placing a financial burden on local churches.

Likewise, the economic institution has influenced education. In higher education especially, students (and their parents) want to know that their significant investment will lead to a promising career. They often view traditional subjects including history, literature, science, and philosophy as less relevant since they do not appear to bolster a résumé. The value of education has become the extent to which it enables students to market themselves to future employers.

Government and the economy are becoming increasingly interconnected. In a one-way shift of authority, local governments have less autonomy as they are eclipsed at the national level. The trade-off is the promise of more services and security at a lower cost. Government is good at promising the free services everyone wants, but the economic reality is someone has to pay for them. Consider the current European focus on economic austerity — as political satirist P.J. O'Rourke quips, "If you think health care is expensive, wait until it's free."

Almost everything about our culture comes back to the economic institution. A culture rooted in the economy gives rise to materialistic perspectives on life. But living well involves more than the physical



provision of life's basic necessities. And therein lies the tension: we live in a society built on a shifting foundation, but we recognize the need to structure our lives on something more secure. The cracks in our social foundation are causing many of us to worry, doubt, and fear.

### **Seeking a Firm Foundation**

Humans have a tendency to place faith in one or more of society's basic institutions to provide security, stability, significance, and sufficiency. Although Jesus explained to His followers that "without me you can do nothing" (John 15:5), we keep on trying. Despite the first commandment's warning not to place anything or anyone before God, we all too often place our trust and worship in something other than our Divine Father.

In more traditional times, people placed their hope in their families — many still do. The marriage relationship can be one's reason for living; a spouse becomes the source of love, inspiration, and meaning. Parents may relive their lives through their children, expecting their children to receive recognition they were denied. In some cultures, intense family loyalties lend themselves to strong clan and tribal allegiances which serve as one's sole source

of identity and significance. Ethnic and racial loyalties are extensions of this primacy of the blood relationship. But no human relationship can offer what God alone can provide.

Education is revered for its promise to provide security and significance in the form of wealth, reputation, and honor. Education is a multibillion dollar industry, and students and families rack up debilitating debt in the pursuit of a successful career and financially stable future. Their debt often prohibits their investment in other areas, such as ministry, service, and family.

Although religious institutions ideally facilitate a proper trust in God, they all too easily replace God with empty rituals. Old Testament prophets warned Israel of her misplaced trust in her sacrifices and Sabbath observances while failing to repent and obey the law of God from her heart (Isa. 1:11–17; Amos 5:21–24; Micah 6:6–8). When religious practices become the object of worship, the deity is understood as an influence to be manipulated or placated in order to achieve a desired end: healing, fortune, deliverance from difficulties, or insight into the future. A god who can be controlled by humans is no God at all. The God of the Bible is the Sovereign Ruler of heaven and earth. If He is not, then we have plenty of reason to fear.

For many Americans, the government is truly their savior. The government promises security and assistance for those who lack the means to financially succeed. If a citizen is poor, ill, or old, government programs can level the playing field. A prominent, modern role of government is to distribute society's resources so all citizens have equal access to all of the nation's benefits. But the government, like all the other institutions, consistently fails us, evoking further frustration and fear.

By promising to "fix" society's needs, these institutions ignore our most fundamental problem and distract us from our central need for mercy and forgiveness.

This need is met only through the atoning work of Jesus Christ.

### Embracing Our Soul's Security

We will continue to be disappointed when we look to institutions for the path to the good life. The traditional faith in family and religion has shifted to a faith in education and government. Education and government have shifted to place their faith in the economy. None of these institutions operate as they used to, with a degree of reliability and predictability that once provided comfort and security.

People have placed their trust in human relationships since the Fall, but the current upheaval in society's primary institutions has left many bereft of their gods, even those who promise more than they can deliver.

There is a connection between the object of our worship and fear. If that object fails us or turns against us, then fear will be our natural reaction. Jesus cautioned his listeners against "selling their souls" (Mark 8:35-37;

John 3:19-21), yet in our economically driven culture, we are constantly bargaining and making exchanges to gain what is tangible (material), often at the expense of what is intangible (spiritual). Our value system guarantees chronic insecurity.

The Bible specifically addresses the institutions of the family, church, and government. Christians who understand their roles in relation to these will be in a unique position to appreciate the lordship of Christ over all the affairs of life. A theology rooted in Scripture recognizes that no institution is sufficient: our security resides in God alone. ■

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